

Photography August Sander and the Germans



“The Persecuted (Mrs Franken)”
COURTESY OF GALLERY JULIAN SANDER/ADAGP

Sander photographed both persecuted Jews and Nazis. His work is on display at the Shoah Memorial in Paris.

August Sander, Germany from all angles

The Shoah Memorial shines a spotlight on the political nature of the work of a portraitist who photographed both Jews and the Nazis who persecuted them

Photography

You would hardly expect to find an exhibition on German photographer August Sander (1876-1964) at the Shoah Memorial in Paris. Although his career spanned the turbulent times of the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich, Sander was not

Jewish, nor was his work focused on the genocide. He was, however, a great artist of the 20th century and an unrivalled portrait photographer. His wildly ambitious life's work, *People of the 20th century*, was designed as a “cross-section of (his) time”. He aimed to capture German society in its entirety, through more than 500 portraits, systematically divided into

seven broad groups and 45 portfolios, from farmers, artisans, artists, politicians and civil servants to those often forgotten, like domestics and vagabonds. It is both a work of art and of sociology. Each portrait is a depiction not simply of an individual, but a “type”, which is represented through their face, expression and also their clothing, tools and posture. Using this approach, Sander, with his exacting yet sensitive eye, gave us some of the great works of the 20th century: a laborer carrying a pile of bricks, a baker as round as his mixing bowl, the fragile grace of three young farmers in their Sunday best and many more.

Victims and perpetrators

Sophie Nagiscarde and Marie-Edith Agostini, curators of the exhibition “Persecutors/Persecuted”, focused on the political and social aspects of Sander’s work, a choice that resonated with the photographer’s family. According his great-grandson, Julian Sander, a gallery owner in Cologne, “(Sander’s) work has been lauded for its aesthetic value for so long that people have been somewhat blinded by the beauty of the images. This new approach fits my vision of the arts as being connected with society.” Indeed, politics and the rise of the Nazi party not only hampered Sander’s career, but directly influenced his work. In the wake of the conflict he modified his creation, adding four new categories, displayed here in their entirety: Political Prisoners, Immigrant Workers, National Socialists and The Persecuted - Jews from his city, Cologne.

The exhibition is a success in part because the curators chose not to submerge the work under contextual details uncovered by their extensive research to identify those photographed. Sander’s admirable photographs are left to speak for themselves, the models stare out at you from crisp prints (for the most part developed in the 1990s), often without explanatory text, while clarifying documents can be read separately, in another room.

August Sander’s art and ideas were patently never compatible with the ideals of National Socialism. In the 1920s, in Cologne where he established his studio, he forged ties with “The Cologne Progressives”, a group of Marxist artists, including painter Franz Wilhelm Seiwert. They posed for him and their art hung on the walls of his apartment. Much of the group’s work was confiscated by the Nazis in 1937 for the notorious “Degenerate Art” exhibition in Munich. Sander’s house was also a place for debate and discussion for the friends of his son Erich, himself deeply politically engaged. In his father’s work, Erich is the “student in philosophy”, who posed in 1926, wearing small glasses and a determined expression, his fist raised in a communist salute.

By 1929 Sander had made a name for himself and his career was on track: he had published his first book of 60 superb portraits, *Face of Our Time*, a precursor to his more ambitious project *People of the 20th Century*. But when Adolf Hitler took power in 1933, Sander’s progress was cut short. His work was embarrassing to the Nazis. It depicted not only the dignity of German farmers and the skills of German artisans, but also people that the regime would have rather forgotten, like Romani travelers and anarchists. The final portrait in the book is of an unemployed man. In 1936, the book was pulled from sale and the manuscript destroyed. But the highest price was paid by his son Erich. After joining the resistance, he was betrayed and, in 1935, condemned to ten years imprisonment for “high treason”. In 1943, he died suddenly in prison from untreated appendicitis.

His photographs, like that of the bored-looking SS Officer, reveal the tragic banality of these human beings

The shock of the war was such that, by 1946, Sander felt the need to adapt his vision, adding portfolios to his typology of German society. Those who he would name “The Persecuted” were the first to come to his studio. They were Jews, obliged to obtain photographs for their new identity papers, which from 1938 on, would be stamped with the mandatory “J”. Sander chose to include a dozen of these identity photographs, and while they may not be among his greatest portraits, the models’ heavy-hearted expressions arrest the viewer. Sad coincidences can be found between these works and contemporary news reports. Arnold Katz, the butcher, is recognizable in a 1933 newspaper photograph, walking taunted through the streets of Cologne, forced by the Nazis to carry signs calling for a boycott of Jewish businesses. He would later die in the

gas vans of the Chelmno extermination camp in Poland.

Stories great and small

The persecutors also had their portraits taken by Sander during the war. This would be a new portfolio, entitled “The National Socialist”. Members of the SS the SA and the Hitler Youth and regular soldiers posed, sometimes proudly, sometimes awkwardly, in their uniforms. In Sander’s portraits, the Nazis could not be further from Aryan supermen, but nor are they monsters. Instead, his photographs, like that of the bored-looking SS Officer, reveal the tragic banality of these human beings.

While, with the help of the Cologne National Socialism Documentation Centre, the curators were able to find the names of The Persecuted and other Jews photographed by Sander, the Nazis photographed have not been identified. It is worth mentioning that a large section of Sander’s archives, which had miraculously escaped destruction during the bombing of Cologne, burned in a fire in 1945, likely due to arson. “In Germany, no one wants to find any link between themselves and these photos. But we’d like to know who they are.” says Julian Sander.

Beyond its political nature, the exhibition also reveals another, strangely intimate and moving aspect of his work. The portfolio “Political Prisoners”, added after the war, is a collection of photographs, not taken by August Sander, but by his son Erich. Having been trained by his father and worked in his studio, Erich Sander became the official prison photographer, taking identity photos of his fellow inmates, but also clandestine portraits, which he managed to smuggle out to his parents. It is understandable then that his father paid tribute to him after his death by integrating these images into his grand work, making them his own.

August Sander never recovered from the death of his beloved his son and artistic heir. One photograph shows Sander in his home, portraits of Erich surrounding him like a shrine. *People of the 20th Century*

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By Claire Guillot

ends with a strange, funereal image: the last photo of the final portfolio, entitled “The Last Men”, is of his son's death mask. A poignant and tragic end to this portrait of German society in the wake of chaos.

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“August Sander. Persecuted/ Persecutors, People of the 20th Century”. *The Shoah Memorial, 17 rue Geoffroy-l’Asnier, Paris 4th. Tel.: 01-42-77-44-72. Open every day except Saturday, from 10am to 6pm. Late opening Thursdays until 10pm. Free entry. Exhibition closes November 15, 2018. Catalogue, co-edited by The Shoah Memorial/ Gerhard Steidl. memorialdelashoah.org*



“The City. The Persecuted” (1938)
ADAGP, PARIS. 2018. COURTESY OF GALLERY JULIAN SANDERS



“Classes and Professions. The National Socialist” (1940)
ADAGP, PARIS. 2018. COURTESY OF GALLERY JULIAN SANDERS